



УНИВЕРСИТЕТ ПУЧОН В ТАШКЕНТЕ
ЦЕНТР НАУКИ И ИННОВАЦИЙ

КОРЕЙСКАЯ ДИАСПОРА В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ: ИСТОРИЯ, КУЛЬТУРА И СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ ЖИЗНЬ

**К 85-ЛЕТИЮ ПРОЖИВАНИЯ КОРЕЙЦЕВ
В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ**

*Материалы 1-ой международной конференции
по корееведению университета Пучон в Ташкенте*

Ташкент, 2024

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Центр науки и инноваций

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EASI¹ AND THE ISSUE OF WHAT CONSTITUTES HISTORICAL DISCOVERY AND TRUE PRIMARY SOURCES?

Abstract. This article covers some of the pre-1937 history of Soviet Koreans serving (along with some Chinese from the RFE) in Soviet intelligence missions to the Japanese empire, primarily Manchuria, Beijing, Shanghai and Korea. These missions were named Operation Maki Mirage and discovered by this author through his fieldwork among *Koryo saram* and the Soviet Chinese in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia (Khabarovsk). This article also interrogates the issue of what are the optimal methodologies to produce “discovery” rather than theory (otherwise known as “theory churn”) in the social sciences and especially in the field of history.

Key Words: *Soviet Koreans, Koryo saram, Soviet intelligence, methodology, Maki Mirage, theory, primary sources.*

Introduction

This is my submission for the Tashkent, Uzbekistan Online Conference of January 20th, 2023 led by Dr. Valeriy Khan on *Koryo saram*. In this paper, we cover the pre-and post-1937 history of Soviet Koreans by discussing EASI (East Asians in Soviet intelligence) from 1920 to 1945 and the methodology behind this historical discovery.

This is a story which has the potential to change current thinking about the Soviet Koreans, their loyalties, the necessity of their

1937 deportation as well as interrogating the issue, “How does a professional historian conduct research to produce discovery rather than theory?” and “Are state archives true ‘primary sources’?” In this case, since I was conducting research about Korean life in the Russian Far East and Central Asia from the 1910s to the 1940s, it was imperative to go to Central Asia and Russia to interview Soviet Koreans (and a few Soviet Chinese). Writing notes from my interviews was not enough. I had to have actual proof. Recording my interviews was the only choice since the oral history accounts of Soviet minorities (such as the Koreans and Chinese of the RFE²) are often radically different than their historical record as “state subjects” in the Russian archives. Oral history gave the Soviet Koreans and Chinese ample agency and initiative, qualities that the state archives rarely attributed to Soviet *natsmen* (national minorities). These interviews *in situ* were recorded, photos were obtained from the subjects and a good deal of state archival work was examined. These three sources (recorded oral history interviews *in situ*, photos scanned from the subjects to support their histories and “working” the state archives) are part of a methodology which I have called “3-D history” and produce the fullest re-creation and representation of the past and its histories [Chang 2019b, 146-147, 160].

By utilizing different methods and conceptual frameworks (especially towards state archives), this author uncovered Soviet intelligence operations which sent somewhere around twelve hundred East Asian NKVD and GRU³ agents into Manchuria (after 1931 Manchukuo) and China proper between 1920 and 1945. Not only did Soviet intelligence use their own East Asians, in fact, the USSR employed all of their diaspora peoples, that is, Soviet Greeks, Poles, Germans, Finns, Turks and others in the foreign (operations) division of the OGPU/NKVD and GRU during this period [Trepper 1977, 37-39; Sudoplatov 1994, 106-109].

History on the Ground

In 2008, I first travelled to the former Soviet Central Asia to pursue this line of research (and methodology). There, I met Illarion Em in Tashkent, Uzbekistan who helped him set up a dinner and full day of interviewing seven or eight elderly Koreans who could reminisce about Korean life in the Russian Far East in the 1920s and 1930s prior to the Korean deportation of 1937. Illarion himself had quite an interesting life and had even spent various parts of 3-4 years in Jalalabad, Afghanistan from 1967 to 1970 as part of a Soviet irrigation and infrastructure project for the aforementioned city.



Figure 1: Illiaron Em was a lead engineer in a Soviet irrigation project for the city of Jalalabad, Afghanistan from 1967-1970. Photos courtesy of Jon K. Chang and Illarion Em.

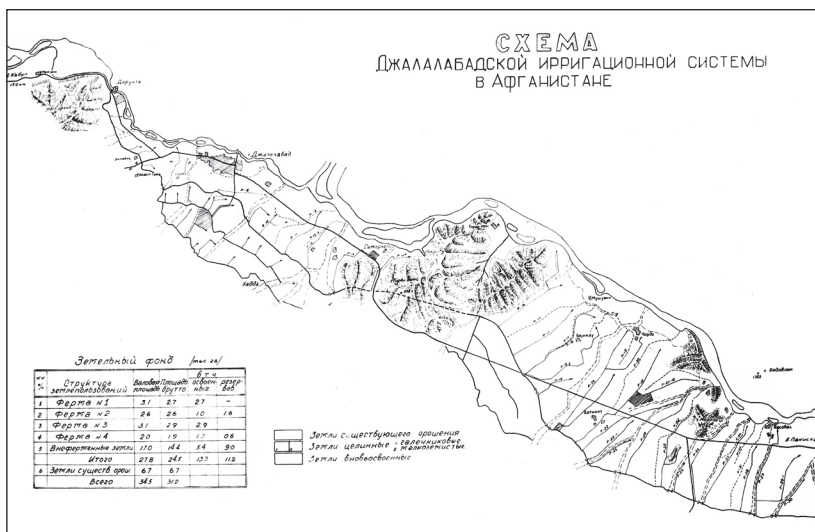


Figure 2: Illarion Em being interviewed on June 4, 2009, Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Photo by author.

During the middle of an interview on June 4, 2009, Gleb Li came up to Mr. Chang and said, "Have I got a story for you! My story is rare and it's one that I don't think the others have. My grandfather Shen Li was a famous Chekist (GPU/OGPU). He was sent to Korea on an espionage mission, captured by the Japanese around 1928 and tortured. He survived 1928 and somehow made it back to the RFE." Gleb was the first of seven Soviet Koreans and Chinese who would tell me about the role of their relatives (typically grandfathers) who participated in Soviet intelligence operations during the 1930s to the 1940s.



Figure 3: The Li Family, 1920. Shen Li, center, was a Chekist/GPU officer in 1920. Photo courtesy of Jon K. Chang and Gleb Li.

Much of my information on the EASI contradicted the histories that Russian and Western journalists, historians and academics have been telling and disseminating in the various disciplines under Russian, Korean and Asian history. The Russian/Soviet archives continually disseminated and repeated the view that the Soviet diaspora peoples were disloyal and at the very

least, vectors for foreign espionage, that is, potential fifth columnists in the USSR. Despite the volumes of articles and books published on NKVD and GRU operations in the USSR from 1920 to 1945, there is little or no mention of Soviet East Asians serving in Soviet *agentura*. The books by Chumakov and Nikolaev serve as examples of the “blank spot.” [Chumakov 2013; Nikolaev 2000]. Interestingly, on some of the missions of Maki Mirage, the Soviet East Asians were assigned to perform the primary “special tasks,” while the “Russians” were the decoys [Chang 2019a, 27]⁴.

Most importantly, this history of a long running Soviet intelligence operation emanating from the Russian Far East was supported by Dmitrii A. Ancha and Nelli G. Miz’s *Kitaiskaia diaspora vo Vladivostoke: stranitsy istorii* [*Chinese Diaspora in Vladivostoke: Pages of History*]. Li Khuei (in English, Li Hui), the Chinese Ambassador to Russia in 2012 commissioned this work by negotiating with Russian officials and by requesting to have access to off-limits NKVD files which chronicled the recruitment and use of East Asians as Soviet intelligence agents from 1924 to 1937. Ancha and Miz’s *Chinese Diaspora* mentioned four hundred Soviet Koreans and Chinese being withdrawn from active duty in the Soviet intelligence services in the 1930s [Ancha and Miz 2015, iv, 285]. Furthermore, Tepliakov’s *The Guardsman of Stalin* [*Oprichniki Stalina*] mentions Soviet intelligence recruiting Soviet Chinese and Chinese foreign students from primarily two universities in Moscow, KUTV (The Communist University of the Toilers of the East) and KUTK (the Sun Yat-sen Communist University) (Tepliakov 2009, 193). To recapitulate, the discovery of EASI by this author was made possible through oral history interviews with Soviet Koreans and Chinese. Information on Soviet intelligence operations (especially abroad in foreign countries) was never opened in their entirety nor even their majority. The best and most secretive information was always kept off-limits especially files about foreign espionage operations (INO,

NKVD and GRU) (Chang 2019c, 265fn7; Pohl 2022, 15). The next subsection details why the “state archives” are not and cannot be a true primary source. (It is simply based on the definition of “primary” signifying a witness or a firsthand account).



Figure 4- A Soviet Korean NVKD agent in uniform. Nikolai V. Nigai, May 29, 1934 outside of Vladivostok, Russia. Nikolai was one of several Korean NKVD officers to take part in the Korean deportation of 1937. Photo courtesy Raisa Nigai.

Discovery and True Primary Sources: Oral History Versus State Archives

Let us begin by asking, “Why was it that none of the Western nor Soviet scholars predicted the fall of the USSR despite millions and even billions of dollars of research budget (conferences, salaries, research books, think tanks, time, etc.) to study the USSR (per annum) in the late 1980s to early 1990s?” The same goes for any prediction about Russia invading Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Why has there consistently been no predictive power nor any real historical “discoveries” made by the majority of academics doing research in the social sciences? At best, most offer theories based upon layers and layers of similarly cited theories (by other academic books and academicians). Where is the “science” in the social sciences without discoveries?

The primary reason is because of sources; most historians, political scientists and other academics (ie. think-tanks) are not using true primary sources. Most academics prefer to cite published papers in reputable journals, magazines or media sources. Second, they conduct little or no “oral history” interviews with common citizens and especially those who present themselves as being confrontational, volatile, and revolutionary in their politics. However, it is exactly this type of firebrand who is likely to lead and incite political crises and social change. These people are only interviewed by academics *after* they come into power. Many of those in higher education are dying to be interviewed and yet, are hesitant to interview the common man or woman (those without academic or political title). This type of willfulness or neglect by academics is the major reason why academic research has little or no predictive power and rarely produces “uncommon knowledge” and new historical discovery. It takes a writer and a voice representative of the people to produce history, rather than the writer/intellectual fulfilling both roles.

Second, the state archives especially those from an authoritarian regime such as the USSR are not a true primary source.

Most of the reports in the archives have state actors (officials, state employees who are selected to represent an event that occurred) who are not contemporary witnesses. They are connected to the state in some way as an official (of a state institution) or a selected "state hero" who writes a report compiled from other reports. Then there are archival reports from witness testimonies but compiled by state officials or state representatives/actors. Again, these are secondary sources and not primary. Another quality that makes archival reports and testimonies "secondary" or a 1.5 source is that they attribute too great a state role (and state policy and state officials) in the creation of the said event or history. In the archives, the role of the common Soviet citizen has been reduced and his/her agency and initiative are typically negligible. Finally, the content which the state official writes for the archives has typically been agreed upon and checked by several levels of official channels and gatekeepers.

Summary

A social science endeavors to produce histories representative of the lives, voices, struggles, and achievements of its people(s). An intellectual using reports or documents compiled by the state produces solely what the sum of the parts allow, a theoretical, state-sanctioned history whereby only the state is pleased. This, in fact, is state history defeating the people because in the archives, it is the officials and the state who play the most important roles and take the credit for turning the masses into an organized, coherent "nation." The end result of the academic using solely state archives is the chronicle of an "imagined people and their projected, cardboard, carbon copy lives." Therefore, if one wishes to write an uncommon truth or history, the researcher must strongly consider adding fieldwork *in situ*, structured interviews and the collection of photographs to the standard practice of [state] archival work.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ "East Asians in Soviet Intelligence" is to be abbreviated throughout this article as EASI.
- ² RFE signifies throughout this text the Russian Far East.
- ³ GRU refers to Soviet military intelligence while OGPU and NKVD were the Soviet political police and the predecessors to the KGB.
- ⁴ This euphemism "special tasks" refers to the hard, punitive or murderous actions carried out by Soviet intelligence.